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SUBJECT: FLASH FLOOD AFTERMATH

11. (U) During the evening of September 8 and the morning of September 9, flash floods in Istanbul and surrounding areas left 31 confirmed dead, nine missing, and damages that may exceed USD 100 million. Affected areas were Tekirdag, a province west of Istanbul, and the western Istanbul neighborhoods of Ikitelli, Silivri, Catalca, Kucukcekmece, and Bahcelievler. Istanbul Mayor Kadir Topbas publicly attributed the flooding to the heaviest rains experienced in the region in over 100 years. He said in certain areas, over "200 kg/square meter" of rain fell during a period of two hours. Those drowned during the flood included morning commuters trapped in busses, truck drivers sleeping in their trucks, and individuals swept from their gardens. There are no known Amcit casualties. Istanbul Chamber of Commerce President Murat Yalcintas estimated the economic damage to be at least 150 million TL (USD 100 million). Heavier rain is forecast in the coming days. Istanbul Consul General Sharon Wiener called Istanbul Governor Muammer Guler to express the USG's condolences.

12. (U) As often happens in Istanbul after a natural disaster, opposition parties and pundits blamed local officials for the tragedy. CHP Parliamentarians Group Deputy Chairman and former Istanbul Mayoral candidate Kemal Kiliedaroglu called on the mayor to resign. Istanbul Technical University Professor and former advisor to the Istanbul Disease Coordination Center (AKOM) Mikdat Kadioglu criticized local officials for poor planning, stating that areas vulnerable to floods should have been evacuated rather than only warned of the risk of flooding. Those in power also complained. Istanbul Mayor Topbas, echoed by Environment Minister Veysel Eroglu (former Director of Istanbul's Water and Sewage Administration), lamented the lack of adequate infrastructure, and Transportation Minister Binali Yildirim (former Director of Istanbul's Seaferry Administration) protested that illegal urban development took place in a flood zone without proper infrastructure. Yildirim said that government officials and citizens were equally responsible for the tragedy. Yilmaz Ozdil from Hurriet newspaper and Gungor Mengi of Vatan both wrote commentaries that noted the above mentioned officials, as well as current Prime Minister Erdogan, were all serving in Istanbul during a similar flood in the same area in 1995. They were also running Istanbul while Istanbul experienced large scale unregulated urbanization.

13. (SBU) Comment: The flood may trigger a familiar cycle in the intersection of local politics and natural disasters exacerbated by poor local government policies. In 1995, the recently affected area experienced similar flooding. Then as

now, Istanbul officials were harshly criticized in some quarters and improved infrastructure was demanded. However, soon thereafter the issue evaporated from the media and the lips of opposition politicians. Some of the local Istanbul leaders who dealt with the 1995 flood have now risen to national leadership positions in Ankara. As in the aftermath of the region's deadly earthquake in 1999, significant measures were not taken to improve public infrastructure, nor did voters sanction local politicians in the next election.

WIENER